

Q&A

Interested in some background info from Sankil Jones himself? Read on to find out what Sankil has to say about...

...his musical influences!

I grew up singing Gospel and mostly listening to black music, so I definitely have a soft spot for Soul and R&B, but the Pop god is a very persuasive one. **Michael** and **Janet Jackson** have certainly influenced me a lot as a performer, and more recently it's been artists like **Justin Timberlake** and **Beyoncé**. The first records I ever bought were **Whitney Houston** and **Tevin Campbell**, and they've been my all-time favorites ever since. My musical taste varies a lot, I also like listening to classical music and I draw a lot of inspiration from **Latin** and **Arabic** sounds. I get asked about **Shakira** a lot, but ironically I only started paying more attention to her after people started pointed out certain similarities between us. My goal was always to create something new and unique and use what I have to its fullest potential, so I let myself get influenced and inspired by my own musical taste and cultural background as much as anything I see, hear, smell, taste or feel that touches me and starts a movie in my head.

...songwriting!

I write all my songs myself, but I am not the type who's been composing on a guitar and writing poetry all his life. I never even had an urge to write my own music until I was asked to by my first producers but then it came surprisingly naturally to me. I write love songs, plain and simple. **Love** and **sex** as well as my very own **personal look on life** and the **relationships** it throws at us are my main topics. I like to play with **words** and **rhymes** and **rhythm changes**. After listening to my very first demo a producer-friend of mine told me he found the verses to be a bit "blah", but I loved the lyrics and the melody. So I recorded them again in **double speed**, and it has sort of become my **signature style** now. I just end up needing a lot of words!

...his roots!

I've lived in so many different places it's hard to say where I actually have my roots. I was born in **Vienna**, but I spent most of my childhood and adolescent years in other cities and countries, usually somewhere close to the ocean. **New York** was probably the place that shaped me the most...to this day my **English** is a lot better than my **German**, and when I am asked whether I am American I instinctively say yes, even though I've never had the US citizenship, just to avoid having to explain my whole life story. My family is scattered all over the globe, from **Lebanon** to **Austria** and **Germany** all the way to **South Africa**, **America** and the **Caribbean's**. I call myself a nomad and a gypsy, but actually my father is a descendent of **Lebanese royalty**. Ironically Lebanon is the one place I haven't been to yet.

...PhoeniX Island!

PhoeniX Island is a concept album; a bridge between **Pop** and **Musical** if you will, delivering the **soundtrack** to the show **PhoeniX Island**. I mixed **Pop** with **Reggaeton** as well as **Arabic** and **African** elements, which turned out to be a very soulful fusion. I wanted the music to be as **colorful** and **fiery** as

the phoenix itself, make the listener feel the vibe of the **island** the story is set on and dig deeper into the sound I created on my debut album **Firestarter** two years earlier.

The entire **show** has my handwriting all over it. From music and lyrics, choreographies for me and my dance crew, the storyline and the background images, costumes and make up all the way to lights and sound... everything has been created and conceived by me with the help of some incredible friends and professionals whenever I lacked the technical know-how.

The idea to write songs for a **stage show** came in summer 2011 when a set designer in Switzerland asked me if it would be possible to spin the songs of **Firestarter** into a musical. Immediately the **legend of the phoenix** came to my mind. The project never happened back then, but I was hooked on the idea. After recording and co-producing the song **Fire** for **Eurovision Song Contest 2012** I felt very inspired to make more music and immediately saw the connection between the phoenix and **Fire** with its **mystical** intro and **tribal** vibe. With a new management and my own dance company the timing couldn't have been more perfect. The music video accompanying the song created quite a buzz due to the **belly dance**-style choreography, and the first live presentation at **Bregenzer Festspielhaus** got me standing ovations.

While **Firestarter** was still a journey to find my sound, **Phoenix Island** has a very precise **concept** and **feeling** to it; the music and lyrics inseparably connected to the **dancing style**, the **look** and the **story line** of the show.

...Beatz & Bitchez – The Cover Show!

The idea to do a show covering **hits** made famous by female Pop stars like **Beyoncé** or **Rihanna** came after doing Beyoncé's **Single Ladies** as a birthday gag for a friend.

Years ago I used to have a cover band that specialized in old school Soul and Funk, and I loved taking other artists songs and putting my own, personal spin on them. This time around, though, I chose songs that sounded like they could have been my own songs in style and production and would fit my vocal and dancing style.

I settled on representing specific artists rather than choosing random songs and quickly narrowed the list down to **Rihanna**, **Shakira**, **Alicia Keys**, **Beyoncé**, **J.Lo** and **The Pussycat Dolls** with **Justin Timberlake** being the only exception to the all-female rule. I slightly changed some of the lyrics whenever I felt like they were too girly, which gave them an almost macho-like touch, but kept the **original choreographies** of songs that were famous for their dancing style like **Single Ladies** and **Waka Waka**. The other songs I either choreographed myself or together with my dance company **Sankils Bitchez**, who play a vital role in all my shows and even appear in the title to this one. After recording two albums and producing a show with self-written music putting **Beatz & Bitchez – The Cover Show** together almost felt like going on vacation.

...Firestarter!

Originally my debut album **Firestarter** was supposed to be clean Rock/Pop with a hint of Dance, but I had something much edgier in mind. The song **Better Man** was the first song I wrote and recorded and it still features the original background vocals sung in a walk-in closet at my producer's home. Later I and a friend of mine, who became vital in my music production, snuck into the studio at night and changed the beat, adding its signature **Reggaeton flavor**.

From then on there was a big discrepancy. On the one side the record label, who wanted a safe, straight forward **Pop album** aimed at the Austrian music market and on the other side me and the musicians, who wanted something a lot more **authentic and unique** we yet had to define. The more I intervened in the production the more heated the discussions became, but I had a very clear **vision and concept** of where I wanted to go. Ironically, what came out in the end was a sound that neither side had planned but that satisfied everyone.

Writing, recording and producing ***Firestarter*** happened under a lot of time pressure in a tiny little studio in **Vienna** that was exclusively built for this production. It was a co-operation between an independent label and **Sony/New York**, and my label bosses gave the Sony people the blue eyed promise to be done in four months (the average time span between writing songs for an album and the final release lies between 12 and 18 months up to a few years in some cases). I work best under pressure, so for me it was heaven, but there was a whole army of producers and musicians involved, and in the end it took ***six months***. I didn't have a whole pool of songs to choose from; I only wrote and composed the ten songs and the extra musical intro that ended up on the final release. By the time it was all done Sony was busy with ***Mariah Carey*** and her second Christmas album so my label decided to take matters in their own hands and release it themselves rather than wait.

I planned to shoot a music video for ***Better Man*** and shot some impromptu scenes outside as a warm up using the song ***U'll Never Know***, which ended up becoming the first and only official music video for ***Firestarter***.